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Press Release

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US-VISIT STOPS MURDERERS, PEDOPHILES AND IMMIGRATION VIOLATORS FROM ENTERING THE UNITED STATES THROUGH BIOMETRICS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

-- Program helps agencies deny 7,000 visas, deny admission to 594, and arrest 39 --

WASHINGTON—A Department of Homeland Security (DHS) program that collects biometric and biographic data from visa applicants and visitors to the United States has achieved unprecedented results in helping U.S. agencies identify criminals and other violators seeking entry to the country, senior DHS officials announced today.

On Sunday evening, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Officers sent a Swiss national, suspected of being a pedophile, back to France as his fingerprints indicated that he was wanted by Interpol.

Created in January 2004 and administered by DHS, the US-VISIT Program is a continuum of security measures that collects biometric data, such as fingerprints, and biographic information from visitors at U.S. visa-issuing posts worldwide and upon their arrival at and departure from U.S. air, sea, and land ports.

In the 17 months since US-VISIT was created, the matching of fingerprints and biographic information against the US-VISIT database has enabled State Department consular officers around the world to deny U.S. visas to approximately 7,000 visa applicants. More than a third of these visas were denied because the applicants' fingerprints matched those on various U.S. government law enforcement and security lists.

At the same time, fingerprints and other data from US-VISIT have enabled inspectors from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to deny entry to approximately 594 people who arrived at U.S. borders seeking to enter the country. CBP is the unified border agency within DHS charged with the management, control and protection of our nation's borders at and between the official ports of entry.

Furthermore, the US-VISIT program has helped special agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrest approximately 39 people through fingerprint matches, investigative leads and other information. ICE is the largest investigative arm of DHS, with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.

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“There is no question that the use of biometrics, combined with strong cooperation among the many entities that make up our immigration and border management system, helps us achieve the national security goals of the nation,” said Jim Williams, director of US-VISIT. “This is one critical way we can stop potential threats to our citizens and visitors.”

"In the past, criminals and others who were the subject of lookouts needed only a new name to slip across our borders. With US-VISIT, fingerprints reveal the true identity underneath any alias," said Michael J. Garcia, the DHS Assistant Secretary for ICE.

The results are directly attributable to enhanced sharing of biometric data and other information between domestic and international organizations. There is broad cooperation among such organizations to share information and match fingerprints against existing data sources. These data sources include Interpol data on criminals and wanted fugitives; the Department of State's lost and stolen passport information; the FBI's known or wanted terrorist list; and other systems. Each of these entities uses fingerprints as its main biometric tool.

Both the 9/11 Commission and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 stressed the need for improved information sharing and cooperation among law enforcement and intelligence entities. Progress has been made toward that end, and the enforcement results of US-VISIT serve as concrete examples. By capturing biometrics from visitors seeking entry to the United States, US-VISIT deprives criminals and potential terrorists of the ability to cross U.S. borders using fraudulent documents and to violate immigration laws without detection.

The State Department, CBP, ICE and other U.S. government entities rely upon the biometric and biographic data contained in US-VISIT to assist them in their daily operations. This vital information was unavailable to them until the launch of US-VISIT.

Several recent cases demonstrate how biometric data, combined with quick analysis and information sharing both at home and abroad, is helping protect the nation:

- On May 15, 2005, CBP inspectors at Los Angeles International Airport encountered a Swiss national seeking admission as a Visa Waiver applicant. A US-VISIT fingerprint check by CBP inspectors revealed that this person was wanted by Interpol as he is suspected of pedophilia.
- On May 8, 2005, ICE agents at the Lewiston, N.Y., port of entry arrested David Kricheli, a native of the Republic of Georgia who was wanted for murder in Germany, in connection with a 1997 shooting that left one person dead and another wounded. Kricheli had been living in Canada for years under a new identity and had obtained a job as a truck driver, routinely crossing into the United States. In April 2005, ICE agents in Washington, D.C., received thousands of fingerprints on international fugitives from Interpol and began cross-referencing this data against fingerprints in US-VISIT. They soon found that an Interpol fingerprint of Kricheli matched the US-VISIT fingerprint of a man in Canada named Michael Tonia who had applied for a U.S. visa. Agents quickly determined that Kricheli and Tonia were the same person. On May 6, 2005, ICE Headquarters notified ICE agents in Buffalo that the fugitive was operating in their area. This information was shared with CBP. Two days later, CBP inspectors intercepted Kricheli at the Canadian border and turned him over to ICE for arrest.

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- A routine US-VISIT check of a visitor's fingerprints by a CBP inspector at John F. Kennedy International Airport revealed that the visitor was using an alias. Further CBP checks showed that he had two prior arrests for drug trafficking, a subsequent failure to appear in court, and visa fraud. The traveler presented a fraudulent visa he had used to enter the United States more than 60 times without being detected by standard biographic record checks.
- Through a coordinated effort by CBP inspectors, CBP's National Targeting Center, and ICE agents, the subject of a US-VISIT biometric "lookout" was located and arrested as he attempted to depart the United States. The subject, an Albanian national, had an active warrant for his arrest in Dallas for failure to register as a sexual offender, a felony. The subject was located by CBP officers, removed from the Lufthansa airliner he had boarded, and detained by CBP until ICE agents arrived to arrest him. The subject was later turned over to local authorities to face prosecution.
- A cooperative effort between the ICE agents in New York and CBP inspectors in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, led to the apprehension of a St. Lucia native who was the subject of a US-VISIT biometric "lookout," with a warrant for his arrest for the rape of a 14-year-old girl. The subject attempted to enter the United States as a visitor for pleasure through the St. Thomas port of entry, and was immediately taken into custody by CBP Inspectors. He was later extradited to New York to face prosecution.

US-VISIT is a top priority for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. US VISIT's goals are to enhance the security of our citizens and visitors, facilitate legitimate travel and trade, ensure the integrity of our immigration system, and protect personal privacy. The initial deployment of US-VISIT represents a tangible and successful interim response to this challenge but much more needs to be done to have a complete automated biometric entry-exit system that fully meets our goals. Meeting the challenge also requires a comprehensive vision and strategic approach to transforming our ability to keep America's doors open and our nation secure.

US-VISIT entry procedures are currently in place at 115 airports, 15 seaports, and in the secondary inspection areas of the 50 busiest land ports of entry. By December 31, 2005, US VISIT entry procedures will be implemented in the secondary inspection areas of all remaining land ports of entry. To date, more than 25 million visitors have been processed through US VISIT without adversely impacting wait times, and more than 590 criminals or immigration violators have been denied admission to the United States because of US-VISIT.

US-VISIT is helping the United States demonstrate that it remains a welcoming nation - that we can keep America's doors open and our nation secure. For more information on US-VISIT, or to learn more about exit procedures, please visit www.dhs.gov/us-visit.

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